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ABSTRACT

Pakistani culture is heavily influenced by the dominant Islam religion, with its emphasis on education. The public schools in Pakistan provide free education, although limited resources reduce the quality of the education available. Private schools provide a higher quality education, and parents usually try to enroll their children in private schools. For this reason, young children experience great pressure to pass a preschool admissions examination and to get into a good private school. Graduates of public schools have limited job opportunities, and social and economic pressures make education vitally important in Pakistani culture. Teachers receive a great deal of social recognition in Pakistan, and even though the financial rewards of teaching are not great, teaching is a prestigious occupation. Religious education, provided in religious schools after the academic school day, is also important to Pakistanis. (SLD)

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# The value of Education in Pakistani culture

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Pakistan is a country of about 125 million; nearly 98% are Muslims. Thus the culture of the country is heavily influenced by Islam - a religion which emphasizes education. The attainment of knowledge is first and foremost a religious duty. The Quran in numerous passages says that God endows a higher status on those who are knowledgeable. Prophet Muhammad said that seeking knowledge is not only a right but it is mandatory on every Muslim, male or female. Parents, and particularly the mother, are held responsible for the education of their children. This education is comprehensive in nature which includes religious, social, cultural, and academic knowledge.

Religious education begins in early infancy. Because education is a religious duty and a social obligation every adult family member and older siblings assume the educational responsibility of the infant. Since the extended family is still quite prevalent in Pakistan children grow up having several "teachers" around them at all times. The infant is taught social manners combined with very basic religious prayers.

Formal education, however, is initiated at the age of four. This event is celebrated with a big party. A female family elder, known and respected for her knowledge and piety, seats the child in her lap and makes the child repeat after her, in Arabic, a verse from the Quran, the revealed holy book of the Muslims. This verse begins with "Read. Read, read in the name of God, Creator of the Universe." After the child completes the recitation of this short verse, the child is showered with physical encouragement, i.e. gentle pat on the back, a kiss and or a hug, etc. and verbal praise. Gifts are given to the child and the child's parents by all those present at this big celebration. This celebration marks the beginning of formal schooling in a public or private school as well as in a religious school.

Pakistan has no government supported welfare system. There are no entitlement programs. There are no food stamps for the poor, no unemployment benefits for those without jobs; no disability insurance; no medicare. There is no program to aid families with dependent children nor social security to help the elderly. And, Pakistan has a high unemployment rate. As parents grow older they depend increasingly on their children. Therefore, in Pakistan children are the biggest asset. They are valued and depended on by the parents and other family members. Their proper education is the parents biggest responsibility, which is taken very seriously by the parents and all other family members. Future lives of children, parents, and other family members depend on the education of children. Education of children is therefore considered to be the best investment.

The public schools in Pakistan provide free education. They suffer from overcrowded classrooms in run down school buildings, limited resources, and consequently a lower quality of education. Private schools are expensive but they are known for quality education. Because of economic reasons and the cultural value placed on education, even families with limited resources try to send their children to private schools. Private schools are under lot of pressure because of the influx of students. They are very selective in their admission policies. The four year olds have to take tests and pass them in order to be admitted into a private school. Family members begin to prepare the toddlers for this test when they are about two and a half or three. The pressure to pass the test and get admitted to a school of choice is immense on the young ones.

Graduates of public schools have limited opportunities to achieve high level jobs in a highly competitive job market or to get admitted to colleges and universities. This forces even the poor families to make great sacrifices in order to send their children to private schools. Parents and other family members often deprive themselves even of the necessities of life in an effort to send their children to private schools to improve their future opportunities. Parents feel that their children's future is dependent on them and they feel that it is their responsibility to give whatever they have toward their childrens' education. Children of poor families attend public schools. Their families often live in slums to save money for school books, supplies, uniforms etc. On the other hand, children who are aware of the sacrifices being made by their family members feel responsible for making the best of this educational opportunity. In the rural areas there are no private schools. Children attend public schools and aspire to do well so they can get jobs in big cities. There is tacit pressure on all school children to achieve and excel in education. This social, economic, and cultural pressure drives children to strive and achieve in schools.

Children of the upper class do not feel the economic pressures but the social pressure is still there to motivate them. Educational achievements of school age children are highly recognized and visibly celebrated by the family members and by the society at large. At each grade level, both in rural and urban areas, in private and public schools, results are publicly announced in class. Students are ranked in order of merit. The level of recognition given to a child is commensurate to the rank order in class. High school examination is a standardized test administered by the Board of Secondary Education. Results of this test are published in the newspapers by the division achieved. There are three divisions (A division is an equivalent of a letter grade, A, B, and C.). Pictures of students who pass with distinction, which is above an A are published in the newspapers. The top two students are awarded gold and silver medals according to their rank orders by the provincial governors. Their pictures along with their brief biographies are also published in the newspapers. These are the coveted honors and students compete vigorously for them. There are rivalries among students of different schools with regard to the number of students who attain distinctions. Cousins and siblings compete with one another for these honors. Within a household children of the servants and children of the servants' employer compete with each other.

Educational achievements of children are a matter of pride not only for immediate family members but also for neighborhoods and communities. Each report card is a subject of family discussion and appropriate action. A poor grade results in older siblings and or parents spending more time helping the younger ones with school work. If necessary, private tutoring is arranged. Sometime social activities are curtailed by the whole family to facilitate more concentrated efforts by the child. A good report card results in a special treat for the child. The results of annual examinations and promotion to the next grade are celebrated on a large scale. They are always recognized by gifts from family members, relatives, friends, and even neighbors. High school graduation is a landmark and the social recognition for successfully achieving it is proportionate to the occasion.

Along with academic education, religious education proceeds in religious schools. After returning from academic schools, children go to religious schools where they are taught how to recite the Quran. As they finish each chapter they are recognized with social recognition as well as gifts. Upon completion of the Quran, which consists of 30 chapters, the family gives a party

and the child receives gifts from all guests. The lavishness of the party and the gifts varies according to the economic resources of the family.

Islamic tradition values knowledge and respects those who possess knowledge. In Pakistan teachers are revered. They are respected by their students, held in high esteem by the parents, and honored by the society. When a teacher enters the classroom even at the college and university
level students stand up to show respect to the teacher and do not sit down until told to do so. The teaching profession is not the highest paid but it enjoys a high degree of respect. It attracts a high quality of students. Teachers are rewarded by social recognition. They are included in all celebrations which are held in honor of their students. They are honored along with their students. They are given gifts by the students' families in recognition of their efforts in the success of the child. They take a personal and professional pride in the achievements of their students.

A combination of family support, teachers' personal interest and pride, cultural and social recognition, economic conditions, etc. create a learning environment quite different from the one found in the U.S. Grade school children in Pakistan experience a lot of pressure but of a different kind.